

# Those Who Remain ...

*These are extracts from a report by Nagrik Ekta Manch volunteers who worked amongst the riot victims who had taken refuge in Nanaksar Ashram, situated beyond Timarpur, north Delhi.*

AT the peak, there were about 502 Sikh families from Nand Nagri, Yamuna Vihar, Bhajanpura, Khajori, Gamri, Maujpur, who had taken refuge in Nanaksar, which translates to about 3,250 people. We watched with growing admiration how the Swamiji of the Ashram, along with two people, Mr Sharma and Kanwalsahib, and perhaps three dozen *sewadars*, managed enormous *langars* and allocated sleeping areas.

When we exchanged notes with volunteers at other camps, it became clear that the Ashram had probably the most efficient internal organisation to distribute food and shelter. If the Manch volunteers have succeeded to any extent in Nanaksar, a very large part of the credit goes to the Ashram. Working there has been and continues to be a pleasure.

As anywhere else, the most pathetic and pressing cases have been the 107 widows. One has only to meet Harbans Kaur,\* whose husband and four sons were killed, and see the tragedy etched in the wrinkles of her face. Or for that matter, two young widows, both under 25, each with a baby two weeks old, without a single earner to feed them. Or the woman who was married four months ago or the one heavy with a child who will never see its father. Or Amarjit, a 15 year old girl who has been orphaned.

Two sets of facts are of primary importance. First, the 107 widows have merely 33 income-earning

supporters and against this, there are 207 dependants, excluding the widows. In other words, each income earner must, on an average feed over 10 mouths. In normal times, it would have been five or less. Second, 77 per cent of these widows have no income earners at all and have, excluding themselves, 177 dependants. Thus, without any steady source of income, they have to feed over three mouths each, on average.

These two facts are worth remembering, from the point of view of long term rehabilitation, especially since the amount given as compensation for a death is a paltry Rs 10,000.

The problem of relief pales into insignificance when compared to that of rehabilitation. There is the problem of fear, the problem of memories, the problem of nowhere to go and no one to earn. The magnitude of the problem comes out in a single incident that occurred during the week starting Monday, November 5, 1984. A young widow sneaked out of the camp, went to the Yamuna and attempted to commit suicide by drowning.

To begin with, almost every widow refuses to return, and very justifiably so. This does not mean that most of them want to go to Punjab. Many have been in Delhi for years on end and do not have close enough family ties or relatives on whom they can make impositions in Punjab.

Widows are not the only ones reluctant to return to their residential areas. Those whose houses were gutted and who saw the worst horrors of mob frenzy have no desire to relive



them in their localities. In Khajori and in Gamri, as well as C block, Bhajanpura, people fear Kadam Singh, Jaina Gujjar, Kesri Jaggi, Tunda Jain, Khemu Gujjar and Ratan Singh, and wish to have no truck with them. In Nand Nagri, no one had returned to A3 Punjabi Mohalla as of November 19, because in nine cases out of 10, the houses that remain are merely burnt out facades.

If they do not want to return, where are they to go? It is clear that the amounts disbursed by government can help in no way at all. For instance, if a man has escaped death and his house has been totally burnt, but the roof has not caved in, all that he gets is Rs 5,000 on state account. Even if he wants to return, this would not suffice even for wiring, cleaning and replastering the house.

Obviously, the more serious problem is that of the widows. In fact, there are two main problems, those of income and of insecurity. It is clear that with the pittance they have gotten as the price of life and livelihood lost, the money will peter out in no time. As we have mentioned earlier, 77 per cent of widows in Nanaksar have no earning members left and have to feed, on an average, three mouths.

In many places, widows have indicated special skills, particularly sewing and knitting. It would be a

\* Names of the victims have been changed to protect their identity.

good idea if aid agencies and banks give loans on very concessional terms to set up cooperatives, according to charters determined by the widows themselves, to purchase equipment. Thereafter, the Delhi administration or the government can supply them raw material and take the finished products, for which they can be given conversion payments. The goods can be sold in government emporia or through other marketing outlets.

As far as the wide, overwhelming problem of insecurity is concerned,

the answer is both simple and complex. There can be no viable macro solutions to this problem. What it needs is a moral commitment of every single one of us, who have worked with the Manch or otherwise, to take the responsibility of four or five such widows and their families for at least the next half decade. We will have to spend some part of our time per week with them wherever they are in Delhi, and help them whenever they need assistance. This might mean getting them ration cards, arranging for death certificates, helping them to move in,

helping the children with their homework, getting the aged ones kerosene, getting people jobs, liaising with *mohalla* people on their behalf, going to their festivals, inviting them over, advising them on financial matters, laughing with them, crying with them, drinking tea with them, playing with their kids, sharing our lives with them to the point that when they see us coming down the crooked lane they know that there is a friend. Without this, rehabilitation is a word for drawing-room conversation.

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## **The Struggle to Make the Government Fulfil its Promises**

### **—Volunteers Report on Government Relief and Compensation**

FOUR of us have been working as individuals in Nanaksar Ashram, Nanak Pyau, Rakabganj and Farash Bazar camps among the riot victims. We felt the need to concentrate on getting the promised compensation money paid to the victims because we found that many claims had not been met. This was because many victims are illiterate and had no experience of governmental procedures. Some of them had paid numerous trips to administration offices but had returned disappointed.

The procedures for getting compensation are complicated and cumbersome. For instance, a death certificate is demanded of surviving relatives. To get a death certificate, one has to go to three authorities—zonal health officer, the police and the court. The entire process takes about 10 days. For an illiterate widow with small children, this proves to be a stupendous task. We have been accompanying victims on these grounds, and have experienced the callousness of the authorities.

Fortunately, the Nagrik Ekta Manch had got the police reports lodged in bulk by the victims in various camps. Had this not been done by volunteers, the majority of victims would never have got compensation, because they were too scared to approach police stations.

Many hutment dwellers who did not have ration cards had no way of proving their bonafides. When we approached the authorities to point out that many people had not received compensation, we were told that all claims had been met and the cases were now closed. No further claims would be entertained. This was when our survey showed that in Farash Bazar, there were 176 unmet claims, out of which 23 were those of widows. In Nanaksar there were 30 unmet claims, out of which eight were those of widows. In Rakabganj there were 63 unmet claims, out of which 7 were those of widows. After much pleading, the authorities agreed to reconsider these claims, provided we first submitted separate typed applications on behalf of each person.

Thus, the approach of the administration is inhuman and multiplies paperwork. Some officers demand bribes. For instance, Misra of Shahdara had repeatedly demanded bribes. We complained to the relief commissioner who promised to have him transferred. Yet, till date he continues to work in the same area. The riot victims are treated with extreme discourtesy when they approach the administration. They are looked upon with suspicion as if they are thieves or beggars. For instance, Thakur Singh from Rakabganj camp told us that when he went to the relief commissioner's office at Tis Hazari, he was accused of having himself broken his own house so as to be able to claim compensation. A quarrel ensued and the officer handed Thakur Singh over to police custody. Another woman from this camp felt so frustrated by the behaviour of the authorities that she tore up her claim receipt, since she had lost hope of getting justice.

When our survey revealed such facts despite the huge claims the Government was making every day in the papers, we began to monitor the process. A delegation of riot victims met the president on December 31, and a demonstration was taken out. Some of the demonstrators were summarily thrown out from the relief camp as a punishment for having dared protest publicly. The attitude of the authorities remained callous

and uncaring. For example, after four meetings with the SDM, West Delhi, the best we could extract by way of an answer was "We shall think about it." The SDM, Shahdara, visited his office for a total of 10 minutes in the whole of one particular week when we were visiting the office every day. We found that no compensation was being paid to rape victims, not even the amount that is paid for other injuries. One woman who had been severely injured when iron rods were shoved up her vagina during the riots, lay unattended for three days before a hospital agreed to admit her. Although the doctor mentioned the injuries to the vagina in his report, he refused to register a medico-legal case.

We feel that the schemes for rehabilitation of widows need to be closely monitored by volunteers. The director of social welfare told us that in employment centres being set up at Naraina and Okhla, women will receive a stipend of Rs 200 plus Rs 50 per child each month while they are undergoing training in handicrafts. Once trained, they will get a salary of Rs 300 a month. The authorities sent a circular letter to many widows, telling them to join the scheme by a certain date, failing which it would be presumed they were not interested. Since not many turned up, the authorities concluded that widows were not interested in employment. It should be noted that the wage being offered by the Government in these schemes is less than the legal minimum wage.

Recently the Government was compelled to give alternative houses to some of the widows in Delhi who refused to go back to the areas where they previously lived. These houses will have to be paid for in instalments.

—Names withheld on request.

As of the end of January, all except two of the cases taken up by this group had managed to get compensation.

LALITARAMDAS

## Lest We Forget...

Writing and reflecting on the experiences of the traumatic two months spent immersed in the relief camps, working with and through Nagrik Ekta Manch is not an easy task. From time to time in these eight weeks one has tried to put one's thoughts down on paper, but very soon given up. I had not realised the extent to which the role of "camp coordinator", "playing God" as it were over the lives and problems of some three to four thousand battered human beings, had



**A widow with her newborn child**

taken a toll of one's physical and mental resources.

The fact that all their names ended in Kaur or Singh stopped making sense after a while. The fact that they had been shorn of hair and beard no longer shocked. One learned to cope coldly, almost brutally, with the organisation of distribution—be it of clothes, soap, food, or turbans. Even the words and gestures of comfort to the widows, to the raped women, the children left fatherless, the men humiliated, became mechanical after the first few days. The only tears came after the fifth frustrating trip to the SDM's office at the Shahdara courts when bureaucratic shrugs greeted our questions about

compensation claims, death certificates, verification, when the subjective satisfaction of sector officers became the sole criterion for determining whether a widow got Rs 10,000 for the death of her husband, or 1,000 for a house totally gutted, or 2,000 for multiple rape and internal injuries. My tears were not tears of sorrow or shared grief, but of anger and helplessness at the inaction and apathy of the petty officials, the hypocrisy of the politicians and the barely concealed hostility of the non Sikh intelligentsia—especially those of the majority community.

Amongst all the negative and despairing aspects of the recent events, one factor which has stood out and sustained a hope in the future is the involvement of so many young people, their collective and growing stand against communalism, as a result of intensive exposure to facts which they had seen painstakingly recorded, filed in FIRs and affidavits and had finally reflected upon together.

If we are to build a movement against communalism, against a corrupt and hypocritical polity, it will have to emerge from new sources, from young people and from the yet untapped potential of women. Some of our efforts must therefore be directed to mobilising and motivating these groups into sustained activity.

Rajinder, age 16 years, son of a construction labourer in Maharashtra, who is studying in the tenth class at Springdales school, was visiting a Sikh friend at Kalkaji on November 1, 1984. He recalls: "I remember that day, everybody in the house was trembling with fear. About nine of us went up on the roof and all we could see were thick clouds of smoke from burning houses and cars. We could



hear cries and shouts. We prayed and hoped that those butchers would not come our side but they did come. I saw about 100 young men, all below the age of 25, each carrying a weapon. Most of them had bamboo sticks, some carried iron chains and rods. Two or three carried small tins, probably containing kerosene.

"I gazed at them with a feeling of hatred. We were nine on the roof, all ready to do or die. The attack was started by us. We were well equipped with stones and bricks. The first person who approached the house was warned by us and then a stone was thrown at him. Then it became like a battlefield. The battle lasted about an hour. All of us were injured. The butchers then left, abusing loudly. We lay on the roof, proud of our success. I wondered whether there were others too helping their Sikh friends. Later, I learnt that there were others. But I also came to know that there were thousands of people who died unprotected.

"Even now, after two months, the Sikhs are not at all secure. I think everyone has a part to play in righting the situation. We have to pick up the threads and tie them again. Assure the Sikh brothers and sisters that we love them. Discuss our views with them. Then we realise that we are one, our needs and aims and achievements are one."

Mallika, a second year economics student of Hindu college, who had been strictly uninvolved in most things, says: "Two months and three days have passed since the afternoon of November 3, 1984, when I first got involved in Nagrik Ekta Manch. That day remains very clear in my mind. Not only was it the first time that I saw with my own eyes the kind of horror that I had never imagined could be but it was also the first time that I personally felt compelled to get actively involved in doing something to help others or to change things. At that time, I did not stop to analyse why I was 'getting involved.' To one who had only known South Delhi and

the university, Kalyanpuri and Trilokpuri were unfamiliar names. As we drove towards the trans Yamuna colonies, the evidence of the three day carnage and arson was plain to see. A huge burning truck blocked our way at one point. It seemed strange that at that time, another pyre was getting all the attention. However, it was only when we arrived at the makeshift camp that the full impact of what had happened hit me. I did not think I would ever see a woman lying on a cold floor in bloodstained clothes with her six hour old baby girl beside her, a baby whose father had been burnt alive the previous day, whose mother had been raped after seeing her husband killed. I did not think I would see a 30 year old Sikh man whose beard had been pulled off, sit on a wooden table in the open, having deep stab wounds in his head stitched by a volunteer doctor with no anaesthesia, stare expressionlessly at his bloody hair lying in a heap on the floor beside him. These things I did see. And they convinced me that 'getting involved' is the only way one can try and prevent such sights from ever being seen again.

### **On Communal Feelings**

"What was remarkable was that in spite of their grief, their despair, their anger against the murderers of their

families, and the inhuman conditions in which they were forced to live, the Sikhs in the camp were never once communal in their attitude towards us, the predominantly Hindu volunteers. What has been truly frightening, however, is that so many educated, well off people in our society, particularly Hindus, both young and old, people who hold senior positions in the government and administration, are today taking what I would call a Hindu extremist stand on the whole tragic happening. Remarks like 'they deserved it' and 'we cannot let them take over this great country of ours' have been heard by so many of us over and over again in the past months. It is tragic that these very people hypocritically vote for a 'united, secular India.' I feel it is very important for those of us who would really like to see the realisation of that kind of India actively to check, in whatever small way we can, the spread of these dangerous communal attitudes."

Anand, a final year student at Delhi School of Economics, adds: "The first time I met victims of a communal riot was at Farash Bazar camp. Immediately, I was no longer interested in whether or not they had distributed sweets or were passive supporters of Bhindranwale.



**People being evacuated from a relief camp**

Whatever they had done, they did not deserve such treatment. My opposition to communalism was earlier something that might have been shaken by argument. Now there was no question of argument. I had seen the consequences of such thinking, and that was sufficient for me to reject it outright.”

Aseem, also from Delhi School of Economics, who worked at Farash

Bazar camp for two months, says: “I felt there was a total absence of communal feelings at the camp. It is amazing that illiterate people had a better sense of discrimination than many so called educated, respectable people who cannot distinguish between the dangerous extremism of a Bhindranwale and the innocence of a carnage victim. So much for the political perception of our educated

elite, the vast majority of which firmly believes that retribution for the misdeeds of Bhindranwale should be sought from every Sikh. Because every Sikh is a shadow of Bhindranwale. Because every Sikh is a Khalistani, and hence a traitor. This is the death of secularism in this country. So much for ‘unity in diversity’, so much for ‘national integration’ and other hollow slogans.”

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## A Party with a Programme for Women

THE Telugu Desam party, which has emerged as the single largest opposition party in parliament, seems to have on its agenda certain significant schemes for the benefit of poorer people, particularly women.

We do not have enough information on how many of these schemes have already been implemented in the two years that the party has been in power in Andhra Pradesh. We would appreciate if readers in Andhra gathered this information and sent it to us.

Unfortunately, the national press has totally ignored the important programmes of the Telugu Desam and has failed to evaluate or monitor them. The party manifesto is available only in Telugu. Therefore, we met Dr T. Kalpana Devi, one of the party’s two women MPs, and from our tape-recorded interview with her, got the following information about the various schemes proposed by the party.

Under the housing scheme, permanent housing is to be made available to poor families at the heavily subsidised price of Rs 2,000 which they can pay in 20 instalments. The government will incur a cost of Rs 6,000 per house in rural and Rs 9,000 in urban areas. The ownership of these houses, and the ownership *pattas* of agricultural land is to be given in the name of the woman of the family. The party’s argument is that if property or money is given to men they may spend it on themselves or squander it on drink so the whole family may not benefit but if it is given to the woman she will use it for the family. About one and a half lakh houses are proposed to be constructed under this scheme.

Under the pension scheme, poor people such as agricultural labourers are to get a monthly pension after they reach the age of 60. This money too is to be given to the woman of the family. Every widow is to get a monthly pension for six months after she is widowed. Insurance policy schemes for economically disadvantaged people are also planned.

Families who have an income of less than Rs 600 a month can get 25 kilos of rice on their ration cards at the subsidised price of Rs 2 a kilo. On the same ration card they can also get a *sari* and a *dhoti* for Rs 23.

Under the education scheme, children of economically deprived sections are to be given free education up to higher secondary, free uniforms and free midday meals. Those below the age of 12 are to be given free transport to and from school.

The party is concerned about the economic status and social security of women. It plans to have a 30 percent reservation in government jobs for women. Some opposition to this measure is anticipated since this reservation for women will be in addition to the already existing reservations for scheduled castes and tribes and backward classes. The party proposes to have self employment schemes for rural women wherein they will be given security free loans and marketing facilities to run cooperatives.

The bill to give women equal succession rights in ancestral property including agricultural land (see **Manushi** No. 17, 1983) has been passed by the state legislature but has not yet been approved by the centre. The party proposes to tackle the drinking water problem in rural areas, which is of crucial significance to women, by digging bore wells.

From the limited information we have been able to get, it seems that the Telugu Desam party has treated as priorities the basic survival issues of people such as food, housing, clothing, water, employment, education, in a way that few others since independence have done, and that it has laid emphasis on women’s survival by trying to ensure that women are not rendered dependent on men by virtue of men being seen as heads of families and thus acquiring a monopoly of family income and property. The party, however, apprehends some difficulty in fully implementing all its schemes unless the centre gives it a fair share of resources.

The progress of the Telugu Desam government in implementing its schemes should be closely monitored and reported on.